



**‘The Empire economy’: how the hit Fox show is making Chicago swing**

**The hip-hop drama is the latest in a growing number of movies and TV shows to be filmed in Chicago- much to the delight of local businesses**

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Published February 6, 2015

The owners of Kokorokoko, a vintage boutique, had no idea their collected wares would feature prominently on Fox’s breakout hit *Empire*. Six months ago, Jennifer Salim, who works in the costume department for Fox, entered their store and asked about their sourcing and menswear. She reportedly provided scant details about her pilot project, but purchased more than 20 pieces of clothing.

Starring Terrence Howard and Taraji P Henson and created by Lee Daniels, *Empire* is a King Lear-esque night-time soap following the triumphs and tragedies of the Lyons family, their hip-hop record label and the competition for the label’s legacy. Soon after *Empire* aired, the stylist returned to Kokorokoko seeking more pieces and finally revealed her connection to the show.

Kokorokoko’s highly specialised 80s and early 90s apparel was later worn by the show’s characters during flashback scenes. The tiny shop, located in Chicago’s hip Wicker Park neighborhood, is just one of a number of small businesses within the city operating as part of a local “*Empire* economy”.

Chicago is not a city known for its illustrious connections to Hollywood. In the past, its use in films or shows depended on their setting – though Oprah Winfrey filmed her chat show in the city for 25 years. But with the implementation, in December 2008, of the Illinois film production tax credit – a competitive 30% tax credit that aims to promote economic diversity and local job growth opportunities – a small yet sustainable film community emerged. Films such as *The Dark Knight* and television shows like *Chicago Fire* found a new home in the city and other productions followed suit. TV shows filmed in the city last year include *Shameless*, *Sirens* and *Kitchen Crashers*.

*Empire*, a breakout hit not just for the local television community but for the 2014-15 television season as a whole, is just the latest Chicago-filmed show to add to the city’s growing numbers as a destination for creators from the coasts. In the process, the city’s

smallest entrepreneurs and store owners have been able to foster connections beyond the Second City and breathe new life into their businesses.

Empire also employs 250 Illinois residents, including the Chicago branch of Toronto's Cinespace, a studio opened by Nikolaos Mirkopoulos in 2011, where the show is largely filmed. The state of Illinois provided a \$5m grant to assist in the creation of the studio as part of former governor Pat Quinn's Illinois Jobs Now capital construction program. According to a report from the Illinois governor's office, Empire spent \$25m in Illinois in 2014 while creating the initial 12 episodes of the show. Half of that sum will apply to wages for Illinois workers, while the show has worked with 75 vendors in the state. "Empire is the latest major production to come to Illinois, creating hundreds of good jobs and generating millions of dollars in economic investment," said the former governor.

Some of those local vendors include Periscope Post and Audio, a post-production studio; the Empty Bottle, a small rock club which was transformed into a different performance venue for a scene starring middle child Jamal; and the Gill Hayes Talent Agency, the only black-owned SAG-AFTRA registered talent agency in Illinois. The agency, created six months ago by two stay-at-home mothers, has backed a small number of local actors on the show.

Empire – with its original and surprisingly catchy music produced by Timbaland and its elaborately designed studios and clubs – aims to build a mythical world grounded in the realities of the music industry. And as Empire continues to gain viewers with each new episode, businesses like Kokorokoko continue to feel the ripple effects. Kelly has noticed a greater interest in people looking for costumes for 80s and hip-hop themed parties.

Kristen Kaza, owner of No Small Plans Productions, an events-planning and public relations company, has also found success by aligning with Empire. The show came to Kaza to plan the cast and crew party just before the first episode aired.

Kaza also used the party as an opportunity to showcase many of the city's under-recognized artists. "Lifting up our city's artists is something we are constantly striving to do," she said. Performers included DJ Tess, who specializes in mixing old-school and new R&B, and a 10-piece band featuring local musicians and vocalists like saxophonist Mr Fullerton and vocalist Lili Kryzanek, known as Lili K. Cast members Malik Yoba, Bryshere Gray and Trai Byers even joined the band on stage for impromptu performances. The party was a rare chance for No Small Plans to get in front of the TV and film industry in a way that would otherwise have seemed impossible for a small, local company. "We've had great feedback and leads on future collaborations and events," Kaza added. "It was a dream job for No Small Plans and an incredible amount of fun."

After only two weeks on the air, Empire was renewed, a strong indicator of network executives' belief in the show's lasting success. For Chicago business owners and performers, it's good news. "Having Empire here in Chicago is providing tons of

opportunities for talent and small businesses,” Kaza said. “[It] proves this city has everything and everyone needed to make it a great TV or film production engine.”